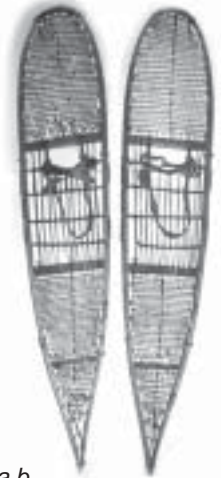




Athabascan Snowshoes

Six pairs of snowshoes are exhibited in the museum gallery. Five are located on the upper wall behind the Visitor Services desk and the sixth pair can be found in the wall case *Athabascan: People of Alaska's Interior*. In Alaska, Athabascan, Tlingit and Eskimos used snowshoes.* The Museum is currently exhibiting only Athabascan snowshoes. Consequently the information in this monograph is specific to Athabascan styles.



SJM IV-X-31a,b

History

The origin of the snowshoe is unclear. Theories include the development of snowshoes and skis in Central Asia over a period of 6,000 years allowing people to populate the northern reaches of Asia, Europe and America. One school of thought states that those people who traveled north and west to Europe perfected skis and abandoned snowshoes, whereas the groups populating Siberia and North

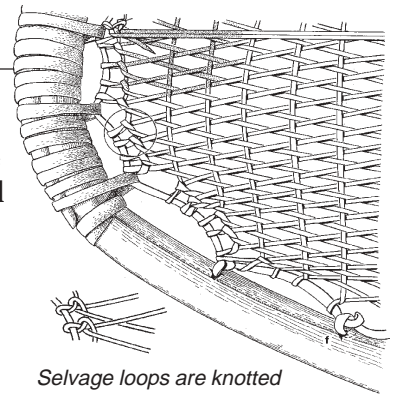
America relied on and perfected the snowshoe. Another hypothesis credits the origin of snowshoes to the people of northern Europe with the technology spreading throughout the circumpolar regions. Wherever they originated, the use of snowshoes gave the people of the boreal or northern forests an additional means of survival in the land of deep and crusty snows.

Snowshoe Construction

Without snowshoes, ancestral Athabascans probably could not have survived. The need for survival elevated the skill of snowshoe making to the highest level of artisanship.

In Athabascan culture, both men and women participated in the construction of snowshoes. Usually men heated and shaped birch or willow to make the snowshoe's bent frame. They also wove the coarser webbed center areas which supported the weight of the user. In the same area they added the heavy babiche harness for attaching the snowshoe to the forefoot. The harness could be slipped into without undoing it through a loop bow knot on the outside used for adjustments. The bow also indicated whether the shoe was for the right or left foot.

Women wove the intricate caribou and moose-hide babiche (thin rawhide line) webbings of the snowshoe's toe and heel sections. Tiny holes, punched into the inside of the frame at intervals, about the width of a man's finger(s), determined the width of the webbing. A selvage loop threaded through the holes and knotted, acted as an anchor for the damp babiche. The lacing resulted in the complicated triangular web patterns seen in the snowshoe's toe and heel sections.



Selvage loops are knotted through the holes and the filler is attached along these loops. (Sturtevant 382)

*The past tense is used here in reference to the snowshoes on exhibit. Snowshoes are still being made and used by Native craftspeople in Alaska and Canada.

Spirituality entered the making of snowshoes. Respect was shown for the birch tree, and the shavings were handled properly. The shoes themselves might have possessed qualities of good or bad luck in hunting and trapping for the wearer.

If a snowshoe broke, the hunter had to know how to make a temporary one from slender branches or he would be courting death. Without snowshoes he could become stranded in waist deep snow.

Snowshoe Use

Styles of snowshoes help identify the areas and conditions in which they were used. Two distinct styles with frame variations can be seen on the upper wall panel.

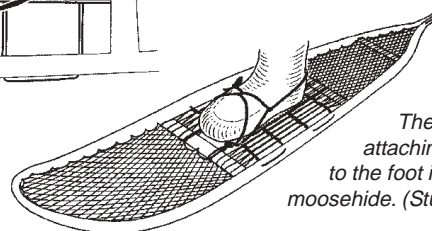
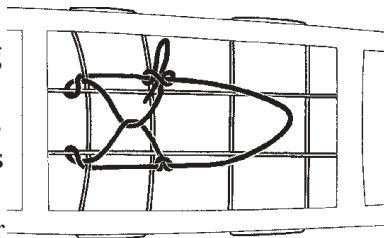
The long, wide snowshoes with fine webbing spread out a hunter's weight, allowing him to pursue game over deep, heavily encrusted snow. A heavy moose or caribou breaking through the crust floundered in the deep snow enabling the hunter to easily overtake and kill it. In some areas hunting snowshoes reached lengths up to six feet. The longest pair exhibited here is just under five feet long and 14 inches wide.

Narrower styles allowed the wearer to move swiftly through the woods without catching his snowshoes in the underbrush. This style did not give support in fresh or

powdery snow and were utilized only in shallow or well packed old snow.

Two designs of what were probably travel snowshoes are exhibited: a small rounded, up-turned toe and a pointed, upturned toe. The pointed snowshoes provided easier handling but did not support a person on new snow as well as the rounded toe version. If a new shoe had to be

made while on the trail, heating and bending would not have been a factor with the pointed shoe. Often regional preferences dictated the shape of the snowshoe.



The harness for attaching the snowshoes to the foot is usually heavy moosehide. (Sturtevant 382)

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